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The logic of ethnic responsibility and pro-government mobilisation in East Ukraine conflict

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Abstract: *The extant theory of ethnic defection rests upon the importance of ethnic identity shift and loyalism towards the regime, which were thus far presented as key explanations of side-switching in ethnic conflicts. This article challenges the validity of these claims and proposes an alternative theoretical argument. This study argues that individuals mobilise against their co-ethnics on the side of government that explicitly challenges and opposes ethno-nationalist aspirations of their own ethnic group due to perceived obligation of ethnic responsibility to protect their ethnic values. Ethnic defection is likely to occur when and if the rebels are suspected by their co-ethnics of violating or disregarding sociocultural, ideological or religious values of their ethnic group. Third-party pro-rebel intervention is likely to further aggravate or even trigger ethnic defection. This argument is examined empirically on the case of pro-government mobilisation during East Ukraine conflict in 2014-15. Micro-level interview data from Ukraine, demonstrates that Ukrainian Russian-speakers mobilised for the government side driven by the strong sense of ethnic responsibility, engendered in the perception that separatists misrepresent ethnic values of Ukraine's Russian-speakers.*

Introduction

In August 2006, Sheikh Abdul Sittar of Albu Risha Sunni tribe pledged his support to the US forces in Ramadi, Iraq. In less than two month period, over 1,500 tribal fighters flocked into the local police training centre, which, since the arrival of Americans in 2003, only managed to recruit 150 locals (Kukis, 2006).

These new recruits were the first wave of Sunni combatants voluntarily mobilised to fight against fellow Sunni al-Qaeda insurgents in Anbar province. The Ramadi tribal volunteers, who later became part of a larger Sunni anti-al-Qaeda force “Sons of Iraq” (*Abna al-Iraq*), were neither first nor the last ethnic defectors in contemporary armed conflicts. Although the practice of mobilising against co-ethnics dates back to antiquity, research on ethnic defection remains limited to a small group of studies. It is the seminal article by Stathis N. Kalyvas (2008) on ethnic defection that has invigorated the debate on side-switching in intrastate conflicts. Defined as “a process whereby individuals join organizations explicitly opposed to the national aspirations of the ethnic group with which they identify and end up fighting against their coethnics” (Kalyvas, 2008, p. 1045), ethnic defection occurs in many contemporary ethnic conflicts. Scholars associated the emergence of ethnic defectors with dynamics of counterinsurgency (Lyll, 2010), internal processes within insurgent organisations (Staniland, 2012), or patterns of double-defection (Souleimanov et al., 2016). Notwithstanding the significance of ethnic defection in intrastate conflicts, the process of ethnic side-switching remains rather under-explored and poorly understood. As observed by Lyall (2010, p. 16), “theoretical discussions of rebel defection are curiously few in the existing literature.” A number of fundamental questions remain unanswered about the processes, which lead individuals to supporting “competitor” ethnic groups. What other factors, besides loyalty to a regime and material incentives, are responsible for ethnic defection? Why does mass ethnic defection occur even in conflicts lacking identity shift and with limited state capacity to sponsor defectors?

In order to explain the global occurrence of ethnic defection across a variety of intrastate armed conflicts, this study advances the theory of *ethnic responsibility* which posits that individuals join “competitor” ethnic group to fight against their co-ethnics driven by the obligation to protect their perceived ethnic values. Ethnic values are sociocultural, ideological

and religious principles and ethics peculiar to a particular ethnic group. Ethnic responsibility is engendered in an intrinsic obligation to protect ethnic values from perceived intra-group threats, which may include disregard for ethnic traditions, organisational structures, religious beliefs or collaboration with external actors. The logic of ethnic responsibility rests upon an assumption that ethnic rebels always remain at risk of alienating their co-ethnics, who might perceive their actions as contradictory to ethnic values, and as a result collaborate with the incumbent. Differences in interpretation of ethnic values – cultural, ideological, religious and customary perceptions – pitch co-ethnics against each other, justifying and facilitating ethnic defection. The emergence of ethnic responsibility is often triggered by external pro-rebel ideological or military intervention. It is also embedded in inherent material motivations associated with mobilisation for a state actor.

This theoretical claim is tested empirically on the case study of ethnic defection amongst Russian-speaking pro-government volunteers in East Ukraine's conflict. The empirical data derives from 86 in-depth interviews with former and active pro-government combatants from ethnic Russian and Russian-speaking communities. Findings demonstrate that Russian-speakers from eastern, southern and central Ukraine, who mobilised *en mass* into pro-government armed forces, were heavily influenced by the collective perception that pro-Russian separatists are misrepresenting ethnic Russian values. As members of their ethnic Russian community, recruits associated pro-Russian uprising in the East Ukraine with external ideological and military intervention.

This article proceeds as follows. The study begins with a critical analysis of armed conflict in Ukraine's Donbas region that emphasises ethno-linguistic complexity of post-Soviet Ukraine. This section is followed by theoretical discussion of ethnic responsibility. Next section describes data and research methods. The second part of the article consists of empirical discussion of East Ukraine's ethnic defection. The article concludes by drawing

connections between the theoretical claim and empirical findings and summarising prospects for future research and practice.

East Ukraine: Anatomy of an ethnic conflict

In 2014-15, Ukraine experienced a series of unprecedented political and economic shocks. The Euromaidan protests leading to the violent overthrow of President Viktor Yanukovich, annexation of Crimean peninsula by Russia, and election of pro-Western government in Kiev, all culminated with large-scale armed conflict between Ukraine and pro-Russian separatists in self-declared Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) and Lugansk People's Republic (LNR) in eastern Donbas region. Since the first months of East Ukraine conflict, scholars and analysts alike associated violence in Donbas with identity politics, such as historical Ukrainian East-West divide, and ethnic grievances between Ukrainians and ethnic Russians in Donbas (Petro, 2015; Klinova, 2014; Kudelia, 2014). These claims were challenged by the proponents of economic causes, who argued that Donbas's lucrative coal and metal industry, and the access to resources have fuelled the conflict (Zhukov, 2016; Giuliano, 2015). Russian intervention was further cited as decisive towards conflict entrenchment and continuity (Wilson, 2016). Another strand of literature that has emerged in the aftermath of Ukraine's conflict is research on the relationship between language, ethnic identity and support for separatism (Arel, 2018; Sasse & Lackner, 2018). Although many have observed the complexity of ethnic identity and language matters in the Ukrainian context (Kulyk, 2018), few efforts were made to explore links between ethnicity and wartime mobilisation on both sides of the dyad (Zhukov, 2016). Yet, it is due to the complexity of ethnic aspects in Ukraine that armed conflict in Donbas offers unique perspectives into understanding an ethnic conflict.

Firstly, let's look into the broader aspect of ethnicity in present-day Ukraine. One particular caveat that scholars of ethnic grievances often disregard is that in Ukraine's ethnic identity and corresponding ethnic values are defined not in accordance with the belonging to an ethnic group, but as based on first-language preferences. In their recent study, Onuch and Hale (2018) argue that in the context of Ukraine, ethnicity and language preferences do not necessarily overlap. A similar finding was presented by Ivanov (2015), who described that the choice of language is far more significant for Ukrainians than their ethnic identity. Due to decades of Sovietisation and Russification under the Soviet rule, ethnic identities collapsed and merged. In the words of Kulyk (2018, p.120), Ukraine: "inherited a very large number of people who considered themselves Russians by nationality and an even larger number of those who retained their ethnonational self-designation as Ukrainians but spoke Russian as their main language of everyday life."

Notwithstanding popular claims that there are three major ethnic groups in present-day Ukraine: "Ukrainian-speaking Ukrainians", "Russian-speaking Ukrainians" and "Russians" (Miller, 1994, p. 1), there is plentiful evidence that "Russian-speaking" Ukrainians largely identify themselves as both Russians and Ukrainians (Pirie, 1996, p. 1080). Drawing on survey findings, Riabchuk (2015, p. 145) observes that "only plurality of Ukrainians identified themselves primarily with Ukraine, whereas most of them defined their primary loyalties as either local, regional, residual Soviet, or supranational East Slavonic." In the same vein, Gentile (2015, p. 202) concludes that based on survey findings: "[W]ith the exception of Crimea, most Russian-speakers in Ukraine identify as Russian-speaking Ukrainians, not as Russians." The same rule applied to pre-2014 Donbas, where, as explained by Gentile (2015, p. 202), "Russian is the language spoken by the overwhelming majority of the population, but over 60% identify as Ukrainians." This ethno-linguistic mismatch is best explained by Brubaker's (2004) theory of ethnicity without clearly-delineated ethnic groups,

which posits that homogenous ethnic groups with clear-cut identification and linguistic boundaries are hard to find anywhere in the world.

It is noteworthy from recent survey data that even the process of Ukrainianness that has been unleashed by the post-Maidan government in order to replace Russian language with Ukrainian in all spheres of life has not been particularly effective in convincing Russian-speaking Ukrainians to switch to using exclusively Ukrainian language. Thus, Pop-Eleches and Robertson (2018, p. 116) found in their survey-based study that although numbers of ethnic Russians and Russian-speakers have not changed in pre- and post-Maidan Ukraine, they observed notable increase in the perception of Ukraine as homeland. This indicates that instead of changing their ethnic identities and values, Russian-speakers become better integrated into their country of citizenship.

The East Ukraine conflict which is often described as a war between ethnic Ukrainians and ethnic Russians (Sakwa, 2014) is in fact conflict where the majority of participants are either Ukrainian-speaking Ukrainians or Russian-speaking Ukrainians. Representatives of the latter, depending on which side of the frontline they are, identify themselves as either Russians or Ukrainians. Nevertheless, it is a well-established and widely reported fact that Russian-speakers are participating in the armed conflict on both sides. A mounting evidence of Russian-speakers involved in the conflict on the Ukrainian side began to emerge soon after the escalation of East Ukraine conflict in April-May 2014. As pointed by Riabchuk (2015, p. 148), “Moscow encountered a fierce resistance of Ukrainian troops and volunteer battalions largely completed with the same proverbial ‘Russians and Russophones’.” Arel (2018, p. 3) observed that “Russian is still fairly prevalent socially, including at the frontlines (many, if not most, battalions operate in Russian).” A similar observation was made by Zhukov (2016, p. 4), who describes that: “Russian has been the language of command in many units of the Ukrainian armed forces, and even in some ultra-nationalist Ukrainian volunteer battalions

like ‘Azov.’” Indeed, one of the largest paramilitary battalions “Donbas” was formed from Russian-speakers mainly from eastern Ukraine and from the war-affected region of Donbas. Two other powerful ultra-nationalist battalions “Azov” and “Right Sector” also have large numbers of Russian-speakers in their ranks (Schwetz, 2014; Abramovich, 2014; Praviy Sektor, 2014). It has been reported that a significant proportion of fighters in the “Right Sector” are from eastern and southern Ukraine (Tsibenko, 2014; Vadjra, 2016). There are numerous Russian-speakers not only amongst rank-and-file combatants in pro-Ukrainian forces, but also at the command level. For instance, the founder and commander of “Azov” battalion, Andriy Biletsky, is a Russian-speaker from eastern city of Kharkiv, and the commander of “Donbas” battalion is an ethnic-Russian from Donetsk. In Zhukov’s (2016, p. 4) words: “The Facebook page of Ukraine’s Interior Minister Arsen Avakov—where he issues official press releases on operations by the National Guard—is in Russian.” Pro-government paramilitary battalions, the National Guard, and Special Forces of the Ministry of Interior (MVD) compose the bulk of Ukrainian armed forces involved in counterinsurgency operation (Anti-Terrorist Operation – ATO) in Donbas region. Remarkably all of these units are dominated by Russian-speakers from eastern, southern and (less so) central parts of Ukraine, rather than by Ukrainian-speakers from western regions. This suggests that Russian-speakers bore the brunt of fighting during the active phase of East Ukraine conflict from April 2014 to March 2015.

All of the above raises a question as to why Ukraine’s Russian-speakers volunteered *en masse* to fight against fellow Russian-speakers from DNR and LNR? Why the call from separatists to rise against Ukraine’s government and its efforts to de-Russify the country has backfired, drawing thousands of Russian-speakers to join the government against the rebels? Amongst many other post-Cold War intrastate conflicts, East Ukraine war is a unique case of massive ethnic defection, which has occurred regardless of the lack of state capacity to

enforce or induce defection, to use coercive force, or even to facilitate effective identity shift processes. The following theoretical sections will seek to offer answers to this puzzle, which will then be empirically examined in the second half of the paper.

Theorising ethnic defection

The fundamental principle of ethnic defection is transformation of identity which enables individuals to acquire “a new ethnic (or national) identity that replaces the old one” (Kalyvas, 2008, p. 1045). The acquisition of new identity facilitates individuals to mobilise in support of an ethnic group(s), which opposes ethno-nationalist aspirations of their own ethnicity. However, there are two intrinsic problems with the relationship between identity shift and ethnic defection. First is that for identity shift to take place, individuals need to be able to strongly identify themselves with an ethnic group. Second is that it may not be necessary to change ethnic identity in order switch sides in an ethnic conflict.

To start with, identity shift is only likely to occur when the conflict involves two or more ethnic groups with clearly defined ethnic identities. Bearing in mind that identity shift is a process of acquiring new ethnic identity, it only becomes possible if an individual already has a fully-formed ethno-nationalist identity. For individuals lacking clear-cut ethnic identification, participation in violent conflict on the side of a “competitor” ethnic group may not require identity shift and may not even involve identity-building processes. In the absence of fully-formed ethnic identity, joining an armed organisation in opposition to individual’s own ethnic group may not be seen as defection or betrayal. Rather, participation in an ethno-nationalist conflict on the incumbent’s side might be perceived as an “ethnic duty” to restore peace and stability. For example, joining Spanish security forces in their fight against ETA was seen by many Basque recruits as part of their ethnic responsibility to restore law and

order in the Basque country (Sullivan, 2015). In a similar vein, anti-LTTE (Tigers of Tamil Eelam) militias in Sri Lanka were motivated – amongst other reasons – by ethnic responsibility (Stokke, 2006).

Ethnic groups with weak ethnic identification may choose to support their co-ethnics' opponents without having to embrace national values of another ethnic group. They may simply align their loyalty to the actor who they consider represents their aspirations more efficiently, even if that actor belongs to an opposing ethnic group. Ethnic defection without identity shift may also occur in mixed ethnicity groups, where preference for stronger actor, or more powerful ethnic group may prevail. Even in mono-ethnic groups with the experience of large-scale ethnic defection, ethnic identity rarely transforms to adopt ethnic values of an opposing ethnicity. For instance, it has been detailed that notwithstanding *en mass* pro-Moscow ethnic defection amongst Chechens, defectors did not abandon their Chechen identity and did not adopt Russian national identity (Souleimanov, 2015). Ethnic defection despite the lack of identity shift has been described to occur due to “loyalism” towards the state actor (Kalyvas, 2008, p. 1050). However, even from the perspective of loyalism – which entails that individuals switch their loyalties (not identities) to a stronger actor – it is hard to explain why hundreds or thousands of people take up arms against their co-ethnics on the incumbent side. For example, loyalism fails to provide an exhaustive explanation as to why thousands of Chechen ethno-nationalist rebels – who had little sympathy for Russians – switched sides during the Second Chechen war. Loyalism also provides no clues as to why Iraqi Sunni tribesmen, many of whom fought in the “Sunni Triangle” against the US troops, decided to turn their weapons against Sunni insurgents and to align with Shiite government in Baghdad. In the same vein, decisions of Afghan Pashtuns to join the Northern Alliance and the US, or of Iraqi Kurdish *fursan* to collaborate with Ba’th regime were hardly dictated by the sense of loyalty to their sworn enemies (Voller, 2014). As these examples suggest, in

many cases ethnic defectors prior to their defection had limited opportunities to experience governance under their future patrons. This means that very often there was simply not enough time for ethnic minorities to develop loyalism towards the stronger actor. In other cases, such as during the Sudanese civil war or the Somalian conflicts, state weakness and failure resulted in the absence of state.

State capacity and revenge

The extant literature argued that ethnic defection is heavily influenced by constructivist causes. For instance, Kalyvas (2008, p. 1051) stated that ethnic defection is likely to take place in stronger states which have the capacity to hold and control most of their territory. However, numerous cases of ethnic defection in weak or even failed states suggest that further explanation is needed (Aliyev, 2017b). For example, ethnic defections during the Sudanese civil war, Somalia's civil war, and Myanmar's conflicts with Karen and Kachin rebels, the East Ukraine conflict, as well as Uganda's conflict with LRA (Lord Resistance Army) demonstrate that state weakness did not prevent the government from welcoming defectors. Instead the lack of state capacity to defeat the rebels, increases incentives for the incumbent to encourage ethnic defection amongst rebellious ethnicities (Eck, 2015). State capacity emerges as crucial when it comes to allocation of resources to defectors, such as wages, weapons and funding, which may facilitate further defections. Yet even in the absence of extensive state resources to attract ethnic defectors, the prospect of legitimisation within state structures, land rights, or simply control over tribal or ethnic affairs and administration may be sufficient for ethnic defectors to convince them in benefits of side switching.

The other previously rehearsed argument about ethnic defection is that it is more likely to occur "in later stages of a war" (Kalyvas, 2008, p. 1051), because it would take time for

would-be defectors to develop grudge against the rebels and to seek revenge. Indeed, quest for revenge has played central role in ethnic defection in Chechnya (Souleimanov & Aliyev, 2015), Turkey (Gurcan, 2015), Algeria (Roux, 1991), and many other conflicts (Kalyvas, 2008, p. 1054). The theme of revenge aligns with the logic of ethnic responsibility in that individuals perceive rebel actions as a form of personal or ethnic offense and switch sides to punish their offenders. Staniland (2012) describes fratricidal violence within ethnic rebel groups in Kashmir and Sri Lanka as the key incentive for defection. Revenge may also acquire individualistic character whereby ethnic defectors seek to avenge personal offenses (Souleimanov et al., 2016). Yet in many conflicts ethnic defection occurs at very early stages. For example, pro-Northern Alliance defections in Afghanistan, as well as pro-government defection in East Ukraine and anti-PKK Kurdish defectors in Turkey, demonstrate that although revenge can emerge as major incentive for defection at later conflict periods, it may not be sufficiently well-developed at the conflict onset. Another explanation would be that intra-ethnic grievances tend to accumulate before the conflict onset and the latent urge for revenge spills out into a violent conflict.

The cases of ethnic defection throughout modern history demonstrate that restoring honour, avenging cultural offenses and obeying tribal or customary laws may prove to be more important than pro-independence and secessionist aspirations. Sikh, Marathi and Pashtun recruits, as well as Nepalese Gurkhas and Maori tribesmen mobilised against their own kin in the service of British Empire are amongst the multitude of examples of anti-independence mobilisation in traditionalist societies. All of the above suggests that the extant theory of ethnic defection does not thoroughly explain the variation in the patterns of defection. Identity shift, loyalism and the state capacity provide only partial explanation for the occurrence of ethnic defection.

The logic of ethnic responsibility

The key theoretical argument of this study is that ethnic defection occurs not only as a result of an identity shift – which leads to individuals adopting a new ethnic identity – but most of all due to responsibility to uphold and protect ethnic values. Although ethnic rebels tend to portray themselves as defenders of ethnic values, their interpretation of ethnic identity may not be readily accepted by all of their co-ethnics. Less or more traditionalist or radical interpretations of ethno-nationalist aspirations are causes of splits within rebel organisations or rebel constituencies which often lead to defection (Gates, 2002). This study proposes that ethnic defection, which occurs in many contemporary armed conflicts, is, above all, motivated by the emergence of ethnic responsibility.

The logic of ethnic responsibility is as follows. To start with, rebel actions against the incumbent are perceived by ethnic defectors as counter-productive or harmful for their own co-ethnics. Disregard for local sociocultural customs, forms of social organisation and religious traditions, and their replacement with foreign ideologies are amongst the most common forms of violating ethnic values. This evokes the sense of collective responsibility to safeguard and “restore” ethnic values and to dislodge the rebels even if it requires taking arms against co-ethnics and joining an actor opposed to their ethno-nationalist aspirations. All of the above is likely, but not necessarily, to be filtered through the presence of an external actor, which may be either in form of a direct military assistance, or as ideological influence and/or financial aid. In many cases, external intervention in support of rebels, both in form of military assistance and, or ideological influence, is likely to strengthen the sense of ethnic responsibility and to encourage ethnic defection. Below, I explain the logic of ethnic responsibility in details.

Preserving ethnic identity and defending ethnic values might serve as key motivations driving individuals to fight against their co-ethnics. Scholars describe ethnic conflicts as confrontations over ethno-nationalist aspirations (Fearon & Laitin, 2003; Cederman & Girardin, 2007; Wimmer, 2008). However, ethno-nationalist ideology has been described in conflict studies as one of the most divisive for inter-group unity forms of ideologies. For instance, Esteban and Ray (2008) theorised that for ethnicity-based groups it is much harder to maintain intra-group homogeneity than for political ideology, religion, or class-defined groups. This leads towards an assumption that while ethno-nationalist objectives can encourage ethnic unity in some ethnic groups, they can also divide others. In other words, ethnic values can be understood differently within the same ethnic group (Knight et al., 1993). Ethnic dissent and radicalisation may lead to split and to divisions encouraging co-ethnics to support either rebels or the government irrespective of ethnic identity. An ethnic faction may join the government against their co-ethnics as long as it enables them to protect their ethnic values. These ethnic “defectors” perceive themselves as defenders of ethnic values and their alliance with the incumbent is seen as instrumental towards achieving their goals.

Ethnic values are formed by group perceptions of ethnic culture, traditions, historical and contemporary developments in the formation of an ethnic identity (Phinney & Ong, 2007). While for some ethnic groups, ethnic values rest upon traditional organisational structures, such as clans and tribes, for others, local customs, traditions and ethics are at the core of values which define an ethnicity. Other quintessential constituents of ethnic values are religious and sectarian beliefs. Many conflict-affected ethnic groups harbour ethno-nationalist aspirations engrained into ethnic values and constructed around ethnic identity.

Previous research has shown that although ethnic values are at the base of ethno-nationalist aspirations of ethnic groups, ethnic rebels may choose to transform, supplement, “upgrade” or merge them with political and religious sectarian ideologies (Sayigh, 1989). These wartime transformations of ethnic values are always subject to discontent and challenge amongst more orthodox or fundamentalist elements within the broader ethno-nationalist movement. Hence, any deviation from the popularly perceived understanding of ethnic values raises the possibility of opposition and evokes responsibility to protect “authentic” values. In the context of armed conflict, a range of rebel actions, including, but not limited to attacks on civilians, targeting of holy sites and disregard for local traditions, may spark violent armed opposition to rebels by their own co-ethnics.

Ethnic responsibility is premised on the need to safeguard ethnic values protecting them from intra-group challengers, such as intra-ethnic factions seeking to alter or transform the traditionalist or populist perception of ethnic values. Efforts to introduce new or marginal sectarian tenets or to outlaw local customs and traditions, to dismantle traditional organisational structures and their influence may be amongst the factors which evoke ethnic responsibility. For example, attempts by the Pakistani Taliban (TTP) to circumvent Pashtun tribal traditions were known to cause splits between the group’s North and South Waziristan factions, when northern TTP factions refused to violate tribal agreements with the army.¹ Although disregard for ethnic values have often led to temporary disagreements within rebel movements or between the rebels and the broader population, cases of armed defection are frequent.

The evidence of ethnic responsibility is notable from a number of recent civil wars. Large numbers of ethnic Chechens were joining pro-Russian militias *kadyrovtsy* during the Second Chechen War in order to protect their ethnic values – engrained in the Sufi interpretation of Islam – from Salafi insurgents (Souleimanov & Aliyev, 2015). Chechen recruits into pro-

Russian paramilitary units were motivated by the responsibility to safeguard Chechen ethnic values from “outside” Arab-influenced brand of Jihadi Islam (Ratelle, 2016; Souleimanov, 2015). Chechen defectors, led by a former rebel Sufi cleric Akhmad Kadyrov, claimed that radical Salafi Islamists have threatened Chechen culture, traditional Sufi sects, clan structure and the Chechen way of life. Participation on the Russian side was seen as instrumental towards achieving their ethnic goals. Russia’s conflict with Salafi insurgents was understood by traditionalist Chechen factions as an opportunity to restore traditional values. Given that ethnic defectors join the fight against their co-ethnics driven by ethnic responsibility to defend their interpretation of ethnic values, they perceive incumbent as the key guarantor of law and order. In a similar vein, numerous Pashtun tribes defected to join the Northern Alliance in their fight against Taliban during the early stages of the Operation Enduring Freedom in 2001-02 (Conetta, 2002). Rising against their co-ethnics amongst Taliban – a predominantly Pashtun rebel group – was seen by Pashtun tribesmen not as defection or betrayal, but as restoration of Pashtun control over Kandahar and southern regions, as well as return to traditional Pashtun values (Behuria, 2007; Barfield, 2011; Giustozzi, 2010). The spread of radical Jihadi Islam was seen by Pashtun tribesmen as associated with the inflow of Jihadi foreign fighters that has led to decline of the traditional customary law *Pashtunwali* and the delegation of powers from the clan system to Taliban. Similar developments were observed during the ongoing civil war in Somalia. The opposition of numerous Somalian clans to al-Shabaab – which is blamed by some clans for persecution of tribal values and Sufi traditions (Gartenstein-Ross, 2009) – resulted in several clans supporting not only the government in Mogadishu, but also Ethiopian troops against their own co-ethnics (Samatar, 2007). Destruction of Sufi shrines and places of pilgrimage by al-Shabaab militants was heavily criticised by traditionalist Somali Sheikhs.²

The revenge argument (Kalyvas, 2008, p. 1051) further supports the logic of ethnic responsibility. Although it is possible that some ethnic defectors will seek revenge for individually inflicted grievances, for many, particularly in traditional and honorific societies, revenge is an issue of restoring one's honour or adhering to customary laws (Nisbett & Cohen, 1996; Souleimanov & Aliyev, 2015). Nevertheless, ethnic responsibility differs from revenge in that it is not only directed at avenging offenses, but also aimed at restoring and safeguarding ethnic values and traditions. Ethnic responsibility emerges not only during the conflict onset, but also at its later stages when ethnic grievances can be expected to accumulate and accentuate.

External trigger

In all of the above examples of ethnic defection, involvement of a third-party actor supporting rebels – either directly or indirectly – has been instrumental towards evoking ethnic responsibility and encouraging ethnic defectors to join the government. Ethnic grievances experienced by ethnic minority groups were often rehearsed by scholars of ethnic conflicts as key factors behind ethno-secessionist conflicts (Collier, 2007; Fearon & Laitin, 2003; Cederman et al., 2010; Buhaug et al., 2014). However, ethnic grievances are not only intrinsic to ethnic minorities persecuted by governments, but can also occur when external actors seek to influence ethnic groups by supporting ethno-nationalist rebellions. External intervention – including ideological and military – has as many chances to strengthen insurgency as to create splits within ethnic groups. Studies on pro-rebel third-party interventions in intrastate wars detail that outside influence often encourages disagreements amongst rebels, which in some cases lead to dissent (Salehyan, 2009; Aydin & Regan, 2012). Divisions in rebel camps are likely to emerge if external actors promote ideologies or

factionalism, which may contradict or differ from ethnic values of the rebellious ethnic group(s).

While ideological influence by an external actor may have a steady effect on intra-ethnic perception of ethnic values and the development of ethnic responsibility, a direct third-party military intervention has far stronger potential to promptly evoke ethnic defection. For example, local discontent with al-Qaeda presence amongst Sunni Iraqi tribesmen has taken several years to develop into the sense of ethnic responsibility leading to ethnic defection in form of anti-Islamist militias “Sons of Iraq” (Clayton & Thomson, 2014). It is only after an offer by the US commander in Ramadi, Col. Sean MacFarland to assemble anti-Al-Qaeda militia that tribal Sheikhs began mobilising defectors (Cottam & Huseby, 2016, p. 82).

Somewhat differently, radical Salafi ideology promoted by Jihadi fighters during both Chechen Wars has led to deep cleavages within Chechen pro-independence movement – that resulted in skirmishes and antagonism between jihadists and nationalists – but had only culminated in ethnic defection with the start of Russian military intervention in 1999 (Souleimanov & Aliyev, 2015). Similarly to the Chechen example, Pashtun discontent with Taliban was not openly expressed until the start of the US military campaign, which served as a trigger for ethnic defection amongst Pashtun tribes and clans (Friedberg, 2002).

Notwithstanding the significance of external influence, not all episodes of ethnic defection involve external actors. The well-known cases of ethnic defection without third-actor intervention were amongst Uganda’s LRA, Kurdish PKK, Sri Lankan LTTE and Kenya’s Mau Mau insurgency. However, the aforementioned rebel groups, alongside ethno-nationalist aspirations, heavily relied on personal charisma of their leaders and on ethnically divisive political or religious ideologies, which were seen by co-ethnics as equally damaging to ethnic values.

Greed-driven?

Similarly to other grievances ethnic responsibility “focuses on the public good aspect of rebellion” (Hoeffler, 2011, p. 275). From the perspective of public good, protection of ethnic values provides an explanation as to why individuals choose to fight against their co-ethnics. However, as with many other rebellions, which start as grievances-driven conflicts, ethnic defections may also be influenced by material incentives. Mobilising on the stronger actor’s side, enables ethnic defectors to reap material benefits, which they would be unable to access when supporting rebels. Although material greed may not always be considered by would-be ethnic defectors when first making decisions to side-line with the incumbent (Staniland, 2014), it is still engendered in the defectors’ quest for stability – including economic prosperity – and human security for their families and broader co-ethnics.

Apart from financial rewards associated with loyalty to the incumbent, land rights, control over trade, and access to political offices were amongst material rewards provided to ethnic defectors (Kalyvas, 2006). Defector armed units are commonly granted official status or are incorporated into formal security structures, as was the case with pro-Moscow Chechen militias *kadyrovtsy* (Souleimanov et al., 2016). Anti-Taliban defectors from amongst Pashtuns were granted political offices in the newly-formed Afghan government in 2002 (Hodes & Sedra, 2013). Provided that the incumbent emerges victorious, defectors will be appointed to govern the rebellious region, or their own ethnic group. Indeed, the practice of appointing loyal locals to leading administrative positions has been a long-standing governance strategy, dating back to the Roman Empire (Ando, 2013). Widely used by the British during the era of colonial expansion, “loyal appointments” became a norm of British colonial rule, particularly in the aftermath of the Great Mutiny (Iyer, 2010).

While the protection of ethnic values may serve as the key driver of ethnic defection, material incentives offer extra motivations for defectors encouraging them to seek not only political stability, but also economic benefits of mobilising against their co-ethnics. Bearing in mind that ethnic defectors provide government with indispensable intelligence and local knowledge (of terrain) crucial in counterinsurgency campaigns (Lyall, 2010), incumbents tend to supply defector militias with weapons and equipment, as well as with salaries (Clayton & Thomson, 2014). Even in the absence of other material benefits, access to military hardware and regular payments may seem sufficient to sustain defection.

Methods and data

Studying ethnic defection during the East Ukraine conflict provides a unique opportunity to examine complex dynamics of ethnic responsibility on an understudied ethnic conflict. Exploring this single case allows analysing the key factors that may be accountable for the emergence of ethnic responsibility: perceived misrepresentation of ethnic values by rebels, foreign influence, identity shift, the effects of state capacity, material incentives and loyalty. By analysing a single case study, this study benefits from the opportunity to capture both micro- and macro-level dynamics, which often elude cross-national analyses. Bearing in mind that ethnic defection has occurred under very similar conditions elsewhere (Turkey, Myanmar, Philippines, etc.), the Ukrainian case has broad implications for research on ethnic responsibility in ethnically diverse societies.

This study draws the bulk of its empirical data from qualitative semi-structured face-to-face interviews with Russian-speaking members of Ukrainian pro-government volunteer (paramilitary) battalions,³ National Guard, State Security Service (SSU) and Special Forces of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVS). Interviews cover period from March 2014, when

the first wave of war mobilisation was announced, to February 2015, when Minsk II ceasefire agreement was signed. A total of 86 (100%) Russian-speaking pro-government volunteers were interviewed. Informants were recruited based on their self-identification as Russian-speakers. All interview participants identified themselves as “Russian-speaking Ukrainians”, although 81 (94%) informants admitted that they are also either ethnic Russians (72%) or have “Russian roots” (28%). All informants identified Russian as the first language and Ukrainian as second. Noteworthy is that 29 (30%) informants indicated that they had limited knowledge of Ukrainian language, and many mentioned that their Ukrainian was “conversational.” With the exception of three (3) female members of paramilitary battalions, all informants were males aged between 19 and 47 years old. With regards to pre-mobilisation occupations, 57 (66%) had white-collar jobs, 17 (19%) were self-employed as small-business owners, 32 (37%) were university students, and 27 (31%) were studying for professional degrees. Sample consists of 53 (61%) demobilised service men and women and 33 (38%) were continuing their military service at the time of interviews.

Another sample selection criterion was membership in pro-government armed units for at least 30 consecutive days and participation in military action against separatists in East Ukraine conflict, also known as Donbas War. Sample randomness was achieved by limiting the number of informants from one battalion or division to five (5) individuals. Access to informants was obtained through 8 volunteer recruitment centres in Kiev and three (3) in Dnipro. Further contacts were provided by the All-Ukrainian Union of ATO Veterans, Ministry of Interior press service, National Guard press centre and the Ukraine Crisis Media Center. Although there were no efforts to achieve sample representativeness, the researcher believes that informants represented at least 20% of Russian-speakers in their respective military units at the time of their service.⁴

Sixteen month-long fieldwork was conducted in Ukraine between August 2015 and October 2017. Two-waves of interviews (23 and 29 interviews) were carried out in the Ukrainian capital Kiev, which has served as the key mobilisation centre for volunteers from western, central and southern regions of Ukraine. The first wave was conducted in 2015-16 and interviewed 23 informants, and the second wave was carried out in 2017 and consisted of 36 interviews, including 7 follow-up interviews with informants interviewed during the first wave. One wave (34) of interviews was conducted in the eastern city of Dnipro (Dnepropetrovsk). Dnipro was selected due to its major role as mobilisation hub for volunteers from eastern Ukraine. In terms of geographic origins of informants, 31 (36%) were originally from eastern regions, these included 7 participants from Donetsk, 27 (31%) from central and 28 (32%) from southern regions.

Interviews lasted from twenty minutes to one hour, depending on the informants' willingness to engage with the researcher. All interviews were based on a semi-structured list of questions, which enquired informants about reasons for mobilisation, personal perceptions towards the conflict, separatists, Russian identity vs. Ukrainian identity and individual incentives for mobilisation. Informants were encouraged to describe their experiences and opinions as narratives and stories. Due to security concerns, no voice recording devices were used during interviews and answers were recorded as fieldnotes. All interviews were carried out in Russian language. Since interviews were conducted on the condition of strict anonymity, names of informants in this article were replaced with pseudonyms. Narrative analysis was used to code the interview data.

Additional 45 interviews were carried out in Kiev (32) and Dnipro (13) with Russian-speakers who had no direct experience of conflict mobilisation. These interviews were unstructured and were carried out with the purpose of situating the analysis into broader societal context reflected in perceptions and opinions of the Russian-speaking community.

The interviews focused on perceptions of participants about the armed conflict, Russian identity, and the notion of Russian World (*Russkii Mir*).

Along with interviews, fieldwork involved ethnographic participant observation amongst Russian-speakers of Kiev and Dnipro. Hundreds of informal conversations with random individuals at informal settings have provided further contextual background, crucial for understanding the conflict-related attitudes and opinions of Ukraine's Russian-speakers.

The following empirical sections begin by applying the extant defection theory to the case of Ukraine and commence with examination of identity shift, state capacity, loyalty and material incentives. The empirical discussion then proceeds to analyse the validity of ethnic responsibility concept in the case of Ukraine's Russian-speakers. With the particular emphasis on ethnic values of Ukraine's Russian-speaking community, such as their distinct from Russia ethno-linguistic identity and their conformity with the Ukrainian statehood, the empirical analysis draws heavily on the conflict participants' and witnesses' testimonies of individual perceptions and motivations.

Shifting from Russian-speakers into Ukrainians?

The question that looms large is whether an identity shift occurred since the start of East Ukraine conflict? Did the Ukrainisation campaign launched by Petro Poroshenko's government to strengthen Ukraineness succeed in "converting" Russian-speakers into Ukrainian-speakers and how did it influence wartime mobilisation of Russian-speakers? Russian-speaking informants both amongst pro-government volunteers and the general public appeared impervious to Ukrainisation. In the words of a respondent from Kiev, "I have spoken Russian all my life and nothing has changed or will change. Yes, we have to do official paperwork in Ukrainian, but that's how it always was...since independence [from

USSR].”⁵ A former paramilitary combatant described that “my entire regiment at ‘Azov’ was speaking Russian. All commands were issued in Russian. I never heard of someone trying to enforce Ukrainian [language]. You could speak it, if you like, but we were all Russian-speakers. We had nothing against Ukrainian, but it’s was just easier for us to communicate in Russian.”⁶

When confronted with question as to whether they felt more Ukrainian after mobilising for Ukrainian army, most denied any connection between wartime mobilisation and ethno-linguistic identity shift. A retired National Guard member stated, “the goal was to fight war not to change ethnicity [*natsional`nost`*]. We [Russian-speakers] were quite happy with what we are and there were many of us there [in the armed forces]. Many in the army. Many in the [paramilitary] battalions. Many commanders were speaking only Russian.”⁷ While many informants reported the sense of national unity and patriotism when at war, none associated them with identity shift. In the words of an army volunteer, “When I was at the front, I was proud for my country... Ukraine, but I was not going to become a Ukrainian-speaker all of a sudden! You can be both a Ukrainian patriot and Russian-speaker. We are all Slavs and [these] languages are not different at all. I never saw it as a big deal.”⁸

These opinions are supported by recent studies on the effectiveness of Ukrainisation in post-Maidan years. Although scholars recorded a steady process of identity shift with more Russian-Ukrainians identifying themselves as Ukrainians in a period between 1989 and 2001 (Stebelsky, 2009), recent survey findings indicate that armed conflict has had no observable effect on identity even in the conflict-affected region of Donbas. Thus, a ZoiS survey (Sasse & Lackner, 2018, p. 145) conducted in both DNR and LNR, as well as in Kiev-controlled Donbas, reported that no significant change is observed in whether people feel more Ukrainian or more Russian, which suggests that no notable identity shift has occurred as a result of conflict.

State capacity, material incentives and loyalism

What did the Ukrainian state do to facilitate ethnic defection and what resources did it allocate towards that goal? Most informants recall that little has been done to attract Russian-speakers into pro-government armed forces. As observed by a paramilitary volunteer: “I have heard the mobilisation call, but I have already served in the army, so technically I did not have to enlist, but I did it. However, I had to buy my own uniform, pay for food, ammunition. They [battalion] provided me with a weapon, but it was an old Soviet AK-47, so after three weeks in ATO, I had to spend my own savings to buy a newer model [of weapon].”⁹ An army volunteer shared a similar story, “No one has ever persuaded me to join. Yes, there was draft, but many of my friends avoided it. When I joined the corps, I was told that I have to pay for tactical gear, and helmet. They issued weapons, but if I wanted to get a newer more functional weapon, I had to give some money to the platoon commander.”¹⁰ Many other informants confirmed that not only there were no incentives, or coercive mechanisms facilitating mobilisation, but most were actually compelled to purchase their own uniforms, ammunition and even weapons. The Ukrainian armed forces’ lack of capacity (Kuzio, 2000) and widespread corruption at all levels of military administration, inherited from the Soviet period (Cabelkova & Hanousek, 2004; Aliyev, 2016b), were the key reasons behind ad hoc character of the Ukrainian wartime mobilisation. Scholars and analysts alike cited the absence of coordinated military strategy and efficient planning in Ukraine during the first several months of Donbas conflict (Menon & Rumer, 2015; Rahemtulla & Goncharova, 2016; Akimenko, 2018). The lack of coordination and planning has led to a series of military defeats that the Ukrainian army suffered in the late April and May 2014,¹¹ which resulted in the rise of volunteer paramilitary battalions (Aliyev, 2016a). Yet even paramilitaries did not

specifically target Russian-speakers in their recruitment. Rather, as confirmed by the interviewees, volunteer battalions were widely seen as better and more effective alternative to the army. “I joined the [volunteer] battalion not because they ‘indoctrinated’ me, but because I knew they are not corrupt and that there is no hazing [unlike the army] and that they would actually fight the enemy, not just hide in trenches,”¹² a former paramilitary combatant revealed when asked to explain his choice of enlistment. Another member of a volunteer battalion has said that in the mid-2014 his battalion has had no recruitment strategy at all and that it survived “solely on private donations” and that “most of our clothing and food came from the volunteers’ families and friends.”¹³ Notwithstanding the lack of state capacity to motivate recruitment of Russian-speakers, they soon became a sizeable portion of counterinsurgency force in the East Ukraine conflict (Schwetz, 2014). Much in contrast, Ukrainian-speaking western regions became notorious in 2014 for the largest draft evasion in post-communist history of Ukraine.¹⁴

Although during the early stages of mobilisation from April to June 2014, both the Ukrainian state and volunteer battalions lacked efficient recruitment strategy and material resources required to attract mobilisation, the situation began to change in the second half of 2014 and the early 2015. A number of financial assistance packages from the European Union and United States enabled Ukraine to invest in modernising its military, which resulted in increased salaries for contract-based servicemen.¹⁵ Simultaneously, lavish donations by oligarchs increased monetary incentives for paramilitary battalion members. For example, fighters of Dnipro-based “Dnipro-1” battalion, founded and financed by a well-known Jewish-Ukrainian oligarch, Ihor Kolomoisky, were reportedly paid USD1,000 per month in 2015.¹⁶ Starting from the late 2014, members of other paramilitary battalions began receiving individual salaries of USD600 for soldiers and up to USD2,000 for officers.¹⁷ With an average Ukrainian salary of USD250 per month, service in pro-regime forces became a

viable career option, which many volunteers were keen on pursuing. As explained by a paramilitary officer: “Lots of our guys joined because they wanted to fight separatists, we paid them nothing and instead they had to pay for everything from their own pockets, but now they remain because they want to make a military career. Its good money, way more than you can make in civilian life.”¹⁸ A member of an elite army force added: “We had really hard time when ATO started and I questioned my choice [of enlisting] many times ... but now we are paid handsomely, plus there are all sorts of bonuses. I never made that much in my civilian career [as a bus driver]. I am glad that I am here.”¹⁹ Thus, interviews demonstrate that although most ethnic defectors mobilised despite the lack of material incentives or coercion, many have chosen to remain due to financial benefits provided for service in pro-government forces. Individual incentives for Russian-speaking pro-government military commanders were even higher. For “Donbas” battalion commander, Semenchenko and “Azov” commander Biletsky – both elected as members of Parliament – the cost of ethnic defection was more than justified.

The paradox of 2014-15 pro-government wartime mobilisation is that despite mobilising for the regime, Russian-speakers remain highly critical of the incumbent and display low levels of loyalism, which seemed to serve as recruitment motivation for some. In the words of a paramilitary volunteer, “one of the reasons why I had to join the battalion is because I had no trust in the government and I didn’t believe that they are able to make things right in the East. We had to take things into our own hands ... because the corrupt oligarchs in power only care about making money.”²⁰ A similar opinion was voiced by an army volunteer who confessed that “I have no trust in the government, but I trust my commanders and I know that they won’t sell us even if Avakov [Minister of Interior] orders them to do so.”²¹ A number of interviewees in volunteer battalions expressed similar views claiming that both President Petro Poroshenko and Arsen Avakov are “corrupt and untrusty” and that it is only “by taking

matters into one's own hands" that a real change can be done in Ukraine. Indeed, volunteer battalions are well-known for their disobedience and disregard for the government orders that encapsulates the Russian-speakers' overall preference to "only rely on their own people". Suspicions that ATO veterans and the battalions' members, as well as the National Guard units, might stage a coup are widespread and often not unfounded.²² The anti-government attitudes of pro-government fighters reflect the overall perceptions of Ukraine's Russian-speakers. As captured by ZOiS survey (Sasse, 2017, p. 12), over 85% of respondents in Kiev-controlled Donbas reported low levels of trust to the Ukrainian president. Remarkably, low levels of trust to the government amongst ethnic defectors – indicative of limited loyalism to the regime – are coupled with strong sense of ethnic responsibility to mobilise.

Ethnic values betrayed

"I felt deep resentment when I heard that those gangsters from Donetsk [separatists] claimed that they represent Russian-speakers of Ukraine and they fight for our rights."²³ This statement quoted from a paramilitary volunteer from eastern Ukraine sums up attitudes and opinions of many Russian-speakers in 2014 Ukraine. Another pro-government volunteer from Kiev emphasised: "We [Russian-speakers] felt offended, misrepresented and simply ignored when separatists in Donetsk and Lugansk said that they fight for Russian values. They don't. We [Russian-speakers] live in peace here in Kiev with Ukrainian-speakers and we don't need others telling us what our values should be."²⁴ A former resident of Donetsk who volunteered for a Russian-speaking pro-government paramilitary battalion "Donbas", explained that "no one asked our opinion... what we want, they just held that staged [pro-independence] referendum and our fate was decided. This is not what we wanted, so I went to fight for my rights, my identity and chance to live in peace in my own country."²⁵ Another

army volunteer from Kiev, but born in Donbas region, explained his decision to volunteer because “not only that small group of bandits from Donetsk has no right to speak on behalf of all Russian-speakers, but also they show us [Russian-speakers] in a very bad light, like we are all criminals, which is intolerable.”²⁶ He continued, “speaking on behalf of myself, my family [in Donbas] and all whom I know [from Donbas] we don’t want these ‘people’s republics’ or Novorossiia, or whatever other fictitious [states] that they create to line up their pockets.”

These opinions are not a single voice in a crowd. Recent surveys reveal that Russian-speakers both in separatist-held territories and Kiev-controlled Donbas, as well as other eastern and southern regions, demonstrated fairly limited levels of support for separatist objectives. A survey conducted by the Kiev International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) on the eve of East Ukraine conflict in April 8-11, 2014 in Donbas, reported that only 29% of respondents supported separation from Ukraine (Guiliano, 2015, p. 5). The same survey has found that about 60% of respondents across Donbas believed that the rights of Russian speakers in Ukraine are not violated (Guiliano, 2015, p. 12). Riabchuk (2015, p. 144) details that a 2013 survey poll in Donetsk recorded 22% support for Ukraine’s integration with the European Union. Representative survey conducted by O’Loughlin et al. (2017, p. 124) in Donbas and southern Russian-speaking regions revealed that only about 20% of population supported the separatists’ goals of establishing a Russian-speaking state “Novorossiia” in eastern and southern Ukraine. The same survey identified that over 80% of respondents believed “Novorossiia” – a major separatist state-building project – to be nothing more than a myth (O’Loughlin et al., 2017, p. 140). The informants’ narratives illustrated that ethnic values of Ukraine’s Russian-speakers are based not on association with Russia and pro-Russian nationalism, but on perception of Ukraine as multi-ethnic state where Russian language is spoken alongside the Ukrainian.

Resentment and disagreement with separatists was even higher amongst Russian-speakers from central and southern Ukraine, who reported to have no ideological connection with the separatists' goals. An army volunteer from southern city of Odessa, described that "I joined the army when I heard that separatist forces approach the Black Sea coast and I did not want them to come to my city. They are just a bunch of criminals and I don't want them to do to us what they did in Donetsk and Lugansk."²⁷ A paramilitary combatant from a central region argued that "this conflict has nothing to do with the rights of Russian-speakers, Russian language or identity. It is all about a small group of criminals attempting to seize power and money."²⁸ The perception of separatists as "criminals" and "gangsters" was a wide-spread narrative amongst many interviewees who claimed that the issue of ethno-linguistic identity was simply hijacked by separatists and employed to achieve their own, primarily financial objectives. Although the Ukrainian government employed similar terminology when referring to DNR and LNR,²⁹ it has to be admitted that cities of Donetsk and Lugansk enjoyed the reputation of organised crime and mafia hubs well before the start of East Ukraine conflict (Aliyev, 2017a, p. 150-52). Informants from central Ukraine almost unanimously challenged the separatists' claims that their ethno-linguistic rights were violated by the new government in Kiev. A volunteer from Kiev argued, "they [Donetsk and Lugansk residents] have had all the freedom they wanted to use Russian. They never even came in contact with Ukrainian-speakers, unless they travelled to the West. It is us here who live alongside Ukrainian-speakers and we have nothing to complain about."³⁰

When asked why so many Russian-speakers have mobilised to fight, most informants agreed that, as encapsulated in the words of a volunteer from Dnipro, "it is very much our conflict. It concerns us more than it does concern Ukrainian-speakers. It concerns the survival of our Russian-speaker [*ruskoyazichnyi*] identity and the identity of Ukraine as multi-ethnic society."³¹ Another informant from Odessa added: "I believe in Ukraine as country where

both languages can be spoken, and Odessa is such a place and I do not want it to change. If we do nothing then life will become black-and-white: Ukrainian-Russian, good-bad, and so on.”³² A number of interview participants directly associated the continuity and survival of the Russian-speaking culture (*russkoyazichnaya kul`tura*) with the war effort. A former paramilitary combatant explained: “I went to war not because I am a nationalist or because I am such a big patriot, I went there because I want to make things right again. I do not want Russian identity [in Ukraine] to be associated with murderers who shot down passenger airplanes.”³³ A somewhat similar explanation was voiced by a volunteer from Donbas, who reminded that “war has changed everything. Before I could drive my car with Donbas number plates to Kiev and never worry about anything ... when the war started, I would get my [car] windows smashed just because of my number plates. I don’t want to be a second class citizen in my own country because I speak Russian.”³⁴ He explicitly blamed separatists for the change of attitudes to Russian-speakers and explained his mobilisation as “absolutely necessary to stand up to my own rights.”³⁵

These narratives demonstrate that Russian-speakers who mobilised against their co-ethnics in 2014-15 Ukraine were both resentful and infuriated by the separatists’ efforts to deploy ethno-linguistic issues as the base of their ideology and justification of their cessation from Ukraine. Although many informants cited patriotism and the obligation “to defend motherland” as reasons for mobilisation, themes of betrayed ethnic identity emerged as dominant. Fieldwork findings illustrate that the ethnic values of pro-government Russian-speakers are centred upon the perception of their Russian ethno-linguistic identity as compatible with and complimentary to the Ukrainian statehood. The Ukraine’s Russian-speakers identify themselves as distinct from Russians elsewhere, which is yet another integral part of their ethnic values. Russian-speaking combatants from amongst pro-regime forces resented that their perceived ethnic values were distorted and twisted by the

separatists. The DNR/LNR interpretation of Russian or Russian-speaking ethnic identity and ethnic values as irrevocably associated with Russian Federation, “glorious” communist past, rejection of European and Western values, and support for Vladimir Putin’s regime became challenged by their co-ethnics who were unwilling to accept ideological dogmas imposed by the separatists.

From Russia with war

Ukraine’s Russian-speakers were always wary of its eastern neighbour’s interference in their affairs.³⁶ Russia’s covert support for DNR and LNR separatists from the start of East Ukraine conflict was deeply resented by ethnic defectors amongst Ukraine’s Russian-speakers even before Russia has sent its armoured vehicles, heavy artillery and hundreds of military personnel to Ukraine in August 2014. In the words of an army volunteer: “I knew from the start [of conflict] that it was Russia stirring up problems in Donbas and setting us to fight each other [*stravlivala drug protiv druga*]. All these ideas of Novorossiia... they all came from there [Russia].”³⁷ A paramilitary combatant echoed that opinion: “this war would have never happened if not for Russia. They send weapons, people, ideology.”³⁸

Russia’s direct intervention in conflict in the late summer 2014 notably boosted ethnic defection amongst Russian-speakers across Ukraine. Nearly half of informants mobilised on the government side in the late July and August 2014. Many explained their decision to join pro-regime military units by indignation over Russia’s interference. As an informant confirmed, “once they [Russians] intervened, it became a war between us Ukrainian citizens and them Russian citizens, it is no longer about identity or language.”³⁹ From the perspective of Russian-speakers, Russian intervention deprived separatists of independent agency, transforming them into mere tools of an external actor. “Those guys in Donetsk and Lugansk

are just Russian puppets. Their soldiers are mostly from Russia, so are their weapons and money.”⁴⁰ Although many informants were convinced of Russia’s involvement in conflict escalation since the start of hostilities in April 2014, Moscow’s direct intervention in August 2014 hardened ethnic defectors convincing them that rebel entities were neither willing nor capable of defending the rights of Russian-speakers. “Basically, it is all about Putin trying to tell us how we should live. All of a sudden he started to care about Russian-speakers/ethnic Russians,”⁴¹ said an army volunteer.

Some ethnic defectors have sought to draw parallels between separatists’ ideology and Russian geopolitics in post-Maidan period. “They [separatists] fantasised these utopian ideas of Novorossiia, and the need to defend all Russian-speakers, who face ‘non-stop abuse’ only after Ukraine decided to go its own way... parting with Putin’s politics,”⁴² argued a Russian-speaker in Kiev. The credibility of separatists was further shattered by the presence of numerous Russian citizens amongst their ranks. For example, Igor Strelkov, the head of DNR from May to August 2014, was a former GRU (Russian military intelligence) officer and a Russian citizen with little connection to Ukraine. Alexander Borodai, who succeeded Strelkov, is also a Russian citizen. The replacement of Borodai with a Donetsk native Alexander Zakharchenko added little legitimacy to DNR in the eyes of Ukraine’s Russian-speakers. In the words of a pro-government volunteer from Donetsk, “neither myself, nor anyone from my circle [in Donetsk] have ever heard of this guy. They [Russians] simply picked up a random local lad to make it look like it [rebellion] is local. He [Zakharchenko] was an electrician before, how could he become a ‘great ideologue’ overnight?.”⁴³ However, the same informant admitted that DNR/LNR were not seen by Russian-speakers as exclusively a “Moscow’s pet project”, but that there were numerous Donbas natives who have joined the separatists attracted by their ideology. Rather it is Russia’s involvement that

has severely undermined the separatists' credibility. This suggests that external trigger was instrumental in alienating large segments of Russian-speakers from the separatists' cause.

Conclusion

This study has argued that ethnic defection occurs not necessarily due to ethnic identity shift or loyalty to a regime, but owing to ethnic responsibility that draws ethnic defectors to join the government that opposes their co-ethnics. This argument was empirically tested on the case study of Ukrainian pro-government mobilisation amongst Russian-speakers in 2014-15 East Ukraine conflict. As emphasised in the earlier sections of this article, owing to the complex ethno-linguistic context, ethnic fragmentation in Ukraine is defined not in accordance with individuals' ethnic identity, but as based on their linguistic preferences. Therefore, instead of employing ambiguous and rather inaccurate divisions into ethnic Russians and ethnic Ukrainians, this project investigated ethnic defection along linguistic distinctions into Russian-speakers and Ukrainian-speakers, which appear far more crucial for ethnic identity than the individuals' ethnic origins.

In-depth qualitative interviews with Russian-speakers who joined pro-regime forces against their co-ethnics reveal that pro-government recruits had few other motivations to join apart from ethnic grievances engendered in the negative perception of separatists' objectives and claims. Interviews demonstrate that ethnic defectors were infuriated by the separatists' claim that they protect the rights of Ukraine's Russian-speakers, and that they strive to carve out Russian-speaking territories from the Ukrainian state in order to create a utopian Russian-speaking state of Novorossiia. From the ethnic defectors' perspective, the legitimacy of DNR/LNR claims was undermined by their involvement in organised crime and their quest for personal enrichment as a result of conflict. The separatists' ideology was perceived by

ethnic defectors as alien and as imported from abroad. A direct third-party pro-rebel intervention by Russia further cemented the conviction that ethnic values of Ukraine's Russian-speakers were hijacked by a foreign government to achieve its own geopolitical goals. This study has found that although ethnic defectors initially lacked material motivation to mobilise and instead were forced to invest their own resources in order to participate in conflict, the proliferation of the economy of war at later stages of the conflict created a range of material benefits and rewards for ethnic defectors. In contrast to the extant theory of ethnic defection (Kalyvas, 2008), Ukraine's ethnic defectors demonstrate particularly low levels of loyalism to the regime that they have fought to protect. Rather it is the weakness of the state and its inability to protect and represent all of its citizens, including ethnic minorities, emerged as one of mobilisation incentives.

This study contributes to understudied topic of ethnic defection on both theoretical and empirical levels. Theoretically, it has proposed that individuals mobilise against their own co-ethnics on the government's side due to ethnic grievances and constructivist factors such as external influence and material benefits, which do not necessarily require ethnic defectors to shift their ethnic identities or loyalties. Empirically, this is one of the few research works to demonstrate ethnic defection at micro-level drawing on the insights and opinions of conflict participants. That said, this study opens new avenues for future research on ethnic defection suggesting that there might be multiple alternative explanations of the phenomenon.

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TABLE 1. Interview Data Appendix

General information			Total number	Percentage (rounded)
Combatants			86	100
Ethnicity	Russian		81	94
	Ukrainian		5	5
Gender	Male		83	96
	Female		3	3
Age	<40		71	82
	>40		15	17
Occupation	White-collar		57	66
	Self-employed		17	19
	University student		32	37
	Professional degree		27	31
Service	Demobilised		53	61
	Serving		33	38
Military type	Paramilitary		69	80
	National Guard		8	10
	SBU		6	7
	Special Forces (MVS)		3	3
Location	Kiev		52	60
	Dnipro		34	40
Origins	East		31	36
	-Donetsk city		7	8
	-Rebel occupied Donbas		4	4
	-Kiev-controlled Donbas		9	10
	-Dnipro		11	12
	Centre		27	31
	South		28	32
			45	100
Non-combatants				
Ethnicity	Russian		36	80
	Ukrainian		9	20
Gender	Male		19	42
	Female		26	58
Age	<40		37	82
	>40		8	17
Occupation	White-collar		12	26
	Self-employed		8	17
	University student		22	49
	Professional degree		3	6
Location	Kiev		32	71
	Dnipro		13	29
Origins	East		16	35
	Centre		12	26
	South		17	38

Notes

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- ¹ See: <https://jamestown.org/program/the-impact-of-pashtun-tribal-differences-on-the-pakistani-taliban/>.
- ² See <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2008/12/2008122055527212230.html>.
- ³ These volunteer battalions are “Donbas”, “Azov”, “Right Sector” and “Aydar”.
- ⁴ There is no reliable data on the total number of Russian-speakers amongst Ukrainian armed forces, because neither the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence, nor individual volunteer battalions record ethno-linguistic identity of their recruits. The above suggested figure of 20% is estimated based on information provided by interviewees about approximate numbers of Russian-speakers in their units.
- ⁵ Interview with Olga, Kiev, Summer 2015.
- ⁶ Interview with Vasyli, Kiev, Summer 2017.
- ⁷ Interview with Gennadiy, Kiev, Summer 2015.
- ⁸ Interview with Ivan, Kiev, Winter 2016.
- ⁹ Interview with Alex, Kiev, Summer 2015.
- ¹⁰ Interview with Vladimir, Kiev, Summer 2015.
- ¹¹ See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/18/ukrainian-soldiers-share-horrors-of-debaltseve-battle-after-stinging-defeat>; <http://euromaidanpress.com/2017/08/23/probe-into-ukraines-largest-military-defeat-at-ilovaisk/> (Accessed June 16, 2018).
- ¹² Interview with Ivan2, Kiev, Summer 2017.
- ¹³ Interview with Maxim, Dnipro, Summer 2016.
- ¹⁴ See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/10/ukraine-draft-dodgers-jail-kiev-struggle-new-fighters> (Accessed June 14, 2018).
- ¹⁵ By 2017, salaries of military personnel involved in ATO were increased fourfold reaching USD389 per month (from USD 161 in 2014) for a soldier and up to USD700 (from USD 384 in 2014) for an officer. See https://en.censor.net.ua/news/371222/salary_of_ato_soldiers_to_increase_fourfold_minister_jaresko (Accessed June 14, 2018).
- ¹⁶ See (in Russian): <https://focus.ua/country/327967/> (Accessed June 14, 2018).
- ¹⁷ See (in Russian): <http://www.theinsider.ua/business/534d55ef2c704/> (Accessed June 14, 2018).
- ¹⁸ Interview with Semen, Kiev, Summer 2017.
- ¹⁹ Interview with Vova, Kiev, Summer 2017.
- ²⁰ Interview with Aleksey, Kiev, Summer 2017.
- ²¹ Interview with Svetoslaw, Kiev, Summer 2017.
- ²² See (in Russian): <http://www.tvc.ru/news/show/id/60718> ; <https://rian.com.ua/photolents/20160623/1012106168.html> ; <https://rian.com.ua/analytics/20150908/373335574.html> (Accessed on June 16, 2018).
- ²³ Interview with Wadim, Dnipro, Summer 2016.
- ²⁴ Interview with Anton, Kiev, Winter 2016.
- ²⁵ Interview with Denis, Kiev, Summer 2015.
- ²⁶ Interview with Igor, Kiev, Summer 2015.
- ²⁷ Interview with Vladimir, Kiev, Summer 2015.
- ²⁸ Interview with Denis, Kiev, Summer 2017.
- ²⁹ The official term for separatists in Ukrainian mass media and government documents is “terrorists”.
- ³⁰ Interview with Boris, Kiev, Summer 2015.
- ³¹ Interview with Leonid, Dnipro, Summer 2016.
- ³² Interview with Sergey, Kiev, Winter 2016.
- ³³ Referring to the downing of MH17 in Donbas in July 2014.
- ³⁴ Interview with Ilya, Kiev, Summer 2015.
- ³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Over 35% of respondents to a ZOiS survey (Sasse 2017: 13) in DNR/LNR expressed lack of trust to the Russian President Vladimir Putin. In Kiev-controlled Donbas, this figure stands at over 80%.

³⁷ Interview with Semyon, Dnipro, Summer 2016.

³⁸ Interview with Aleksey, Kiev, Summer 2017.

³⁹ Interview with Boris, Kiev, Summer 2015.

⁴⁰ Interview with Boris, Kiev, Summer 2015.

⁴¹ Interview with Oleg, Kiev, Summer 2017.

⁴² Interview with Jenya, Kiev, Summer 2016.

⁴³ Interview with Lev, Dnipro, Summer 2016.